

BUILDERS for CHRIST



# Bravid Washington Harris

in Liberia

by JOHN M. BURGESS

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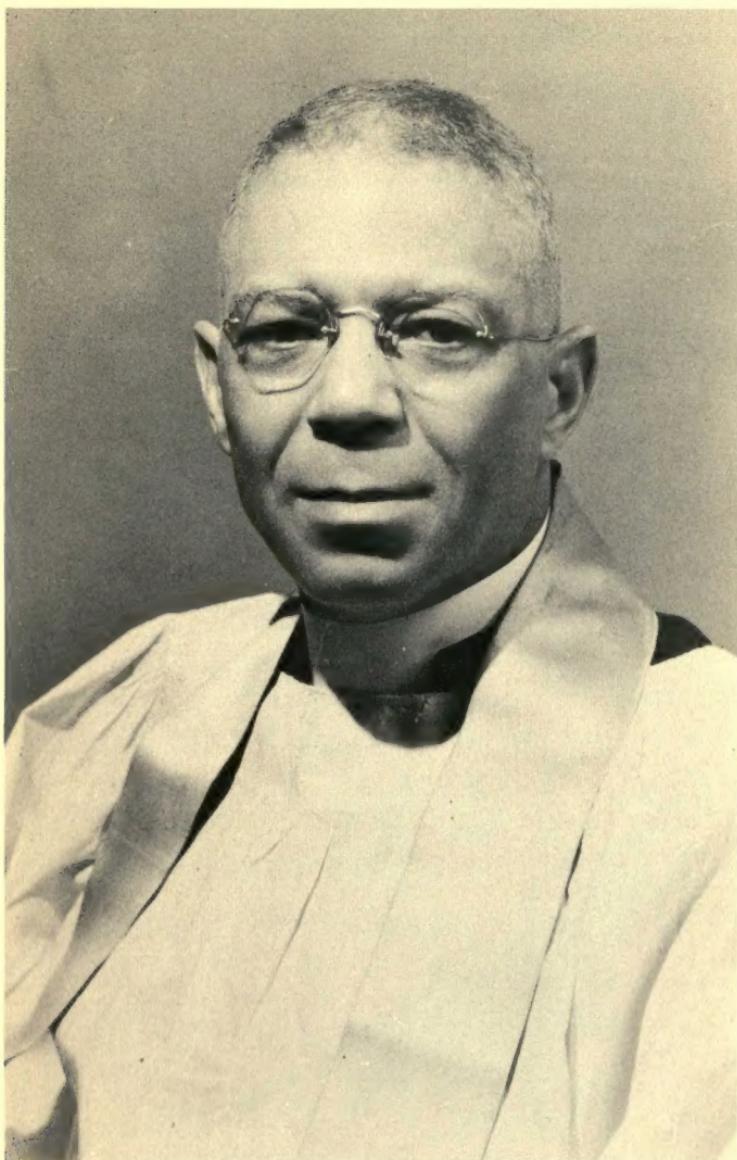
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*This pamphlet is one of a series of biographies of Builders for Christ edited by the Rev. Powel Mills Dawley, Ph.D. Each pamphlet presents a glimpse into the life and work of a Christian who has responded to the call to a missionary vocation. The series covers a wide range of people, times, and places. All are of special interest and concern to Episcopalians. The general editor, Dr. Dawley, is Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the General Theological Seminary, New York, and the author of two volumes in the Church's Teaching series, Chapters in Church History and The Episcopal Church and Its Work.*

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**BRAVID WASHINGTON HARRIS**

*Eighth Missionary Bishop of Liberia*

*The  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
in Liberia*



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MILES  
SCALE

# Harris of Liberia

by JOHN M. BURGESS

WHAT DOES AFRICA MEAN TO us? Deadly insects and wild animals? Cruel, superstitious natives; dark, impenetrable jungles; hot, steaming swamps? Strange and mysterious diseases, slavery, cannibalism? Yes, Africa brings these to our minds, and to some extent they are all part of life on the Dark Continent. But there are other things, too. Romantic names come to our ears: The Gold and Ivory Coasts, the Congo, the Sudan, the Bight of Benin, names that rise from a history, some of it glorious and exciting, some of it sordid and tragic.

*Beware! Beware! The Bight of Benin!  
Forty come out; thirty-nine stay in.*

## AFRICA IS PEOPLE

So sailors sang of the fate of many of those who in past ages intruded upon the solemn vastness of the African Continent. The truth is, of course, that Africa is *people*, black people. They are men, women, and children of an ancient and fascinating culture. They have met the problem of living in the tropics in ways that are quite different from anything known in the West, but this

does not make them an inferior race. Their native way of life has been violently shaken, spoiled, and almost destroyed by the encroachments of colonizers, adventurers, and merchants. Much of our duty in Africa to-day is not only to assist the Africans to adjustments to a modern age, but to restore to them something that was taken away. It is our Christian conviction that the African can again gain a sense of dignity as he understands his status as a child of God, and comes to know that he has equal responsibilities in the common life of all mankind.

Missionary activity in Africa, then, is partly a work of reparation. Christians are moved by the springs of penitence for the long years of selfish and cruel exploitation, and stirred by the belief that the life in Christ, offered and shared, is one form of reparation. The story of Liberia, and the Episcopal Church's efforts there under the leadership of its present missionary bishop, Bravid Washington Harris, illustrate this theme in dramatic fashion.

#### THE LOVE OF LIBERTY BROUGHT US HERE

*The love of liberty brought us here.* This simple motto, timeless in its sentiment, is found on the seal of the Liberian Republic. For over a century this little country has been the home of a self-governing, sovereign people, one of the two independent Negro states in the world. About the size of our State of Ohio, its strategic place in the South Atlantic has invested it with an importance that transcends its extent. Located on the bulge of West Africa, Liberia lies between the British colony of Sierra Leone and the French territories of Guinea and the Ivory Coast. Its history has led the

people of Liberia fervently to cherish the love of liberty, and firmly to stand for those principles on which their independence rests. In his inaugural address on January 7, 1952, William V. S. Tubman, the President of Liberia, said:

It shall be our continuous quest vigorously to seek cultivation of friendship, good will, and co-operation with all nations, particularly those states and peoples who believe in, and adhere to, the principles of democracy, freedom, tolerance, equality, and justice for all, in the conduct of the international affairs of the State, having special regard for the great United States of America, our more than century-old trusted, tested, friend and mother country. . . .

With the firm belief and steadfast faith in the axiom that all men are created free and independent, and therefore entitled to the benefits and privileges of self-determination and the natural right to conduct their own political affairs, we shall seek to co-operate with all democratic and freedom-loving peoples and nations, through the aegis of the United Nations, to adopt and to prosecute speedily adequate and effective measures whereby the teeming millions of mankind inhabiting most of the underdeveloped areas of the world . . . may be able to assume the responsibility of full sovereignty and independence . . . in the shortest possible period of time.

The enlightened leadership reflected in this presidential address did not rise overnight in Liberia. It is the culmination of more than a century of effort on the part of a humble, but determined people to lift themselves into a proper understanding of these lofty ideals, and to make a place for themselves in the modern world. Their story is a stirring saga of black pioneers, freed from the bonds of serfdom, who endeavored to build for themselves and their children a home that would be forever strong and independent.

In February, 1820, a shipload of settlers from America landed on the shores of West Africa. This expedition was sponsored by the American Colonization Society, organized in 1816 for the express purpose of assisting freed slaves in the United States to return to Africa. Already the experiment had been tried in the British colony of Sierra Leone, where two settlements of freedmen had been established. The American society followed this pattern. Like the little band of white settlers who landed on Plymouth Rock two centuries earlier, the first colonizers were hit by disasters that tried their courage and strength to the utmost. Despite the natural resources and potentialities of the country, disease, hardships, and the hostility of the native tribesmen took a heavy toll in the first months. Within a year, however, the intrepid courage of the first settlers was rewarded. With the arrival of a second shipload of men and women, a permanent settlement was made in Liberia.

These freedmen were not merely natives who had returned home. For the vast majority of them, and the thousands who followed them in the next two decades, America was home, not Africa. Two centuries of life in the institution of slavery in the United States had obliterated much of the background of their ancient African heritage. They spoke English, had Western names, and many of them were Christians. Africa was alien, fearsome, and mysterious. The climate with its rainy seasons was a hazard, wild animals, poisonous snakes and insects, and tropical disease were frightening dangers, and the antipathy of the African natives was an unexpected difficulty. The tribesmen attacked the colonists several times before a peace was made

that enabled the settlers from America and the West Indies to enter in increasing numbers. A town soon sprang into being at the mouth of the Mesurado River, named Monrovia, in honor of President James Monroe, onetime head of the American Colonization Society. In 1839 this and several other settlements were united in what was called the Commonwealth of Liberia, and in 1847 the country achieved the complete sovereignty of an independent nation. The constitution of the new Republic of Liberia was fashioned after that of the United States; its motto, *The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here*, embodied sentiments that had been inculcated by the American heritage of freedom. Within a few years the new Republic was formally recognized by the leading nations of the world, American recognition being made in 1862 during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. The delay in American recognition was due to no lack of interest in Liberians on the part of Americans; rather it was owing to the tragic conflict into which the sections of the United States had come over the question of slavery.

#### AN AREA RICH IN NATURAL RESOURCES

WHAT began as a benevolent and philanthropic attitude on the part of the United States toward the struggle of former slaves to establish a homeland of their own has become through the years an intense interest in an area rich in natural resources. Though the freed Liberians were spared the terrors of the slave trade and the ruthless exploitation of the land that went on through much of the nineteenth century, all around them the traders and adventurers from Europe and the Near East were bleeding a prostrate continent. The

very word *Congo* came to stand for humanity bathed in blood and shackled in chains. Few stories are more revolting to the conscience of civilized man than that of the ferocity and lust for wealth in which great areas of the African continent were ravished.

Liberia has her share of Africa's resources, and the events leading up to World War II made America aware of the potentialities of the new nation. When, for example, the supply of rubber was suddenly cut off from East Indian sources, the United States discovered that Liberia was an important producer of this commodity. The experiments of the Firestone Company, made under liberal concessions from the Liberian government for the development of rubber plantations, have produced some of the finest rubber plantations in the world. Similarly, the rich mineral resources of the West African Republic have only recently been explored and still await full development. This is being done with remarkable speed. In 1951 some of the purest iron ore in the world was found only forty-five miles from Monrovia, and today more than a million tons of that ore are exported annually. One sign of the increasing volume of trade was the opening, in 1948, of the Free Port of Monrovia, one of the best harbors on the West African coast, and now one of the busiest.

All this seems a far cry from the strangeness of the jungles, the diseases, and the primitive tribesmen by which the first colonists were met a little more than a century ago. But the steady progress of Liberia has been made amid and despite these obstacles. It is this spirit of overcoming difficulties that has aroused the hopes of the Church for an effective missionary pro-

gram among the Liberians. Here is a small nation, many of whose leaders were bred in the Western Christian tradition, that has ardently cherished its love for democracy and liberty for more than a hundred years and has taught its people to express that affection in concrete ways. Churchmen, planning their missionary strategy in Liberia, recognize that it is not our task to "tell them what to do," but rather to help them to realize their own potential in every way. We may, therefore, assist in training their leaders, introduce them to modern and efficient methods of husbandry, economy, education, and industry, and make it plain that Liberia stands by her own right as one among the nations of the world. But more than that, we must display our conviction that the Liberian people are part of the family of Christ as well. This program demands from the Church in America the highest type of consecrated and honest leadership. Devotion, imagination, and integrity have always been required of our missionaries in Africa, and today it is this kind of leadership that is given by Bravid Washington Harris, eighth Missionary Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Liberia.

#### A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR BRAVID HARRIS

**BISHOP HARRIS'** consecration in Norfolk, Virginia, on April 17, 1945, was a service that signalized a new opportunity for a man whose life was closely associated with the work of the Episcopal Church among Negroes. Educated at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and at the Bishop Payne Divinity School—a theological seminary named for John Payne, Missionary Bishop of Liberia for twenty years after 1851—

Bravid Harris served overseas as a first lieutenant in World War I, and afterwards was, for ten years, rector of Grace Church, Norfolk. The people of this outstanding Negro parish, under the energetic direction of their rector, acquired a dynamic conception of their role in the community and built up a noteworthy reputation for responsible service. Harris soon went beyond the duties of the parish, acting as archdeacon of the extensive Negro work in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. At the time of his election to the episcopate he was Secretary for Negro Work in the National Council, an office which he discharged with such vigor as to inspire and accelerate the pace of the Church's work in this important field.

It was natural that the House of Bishops should turn to Bravid Harris to take charge of the Liberian work. As rector and archdeacon he had acquired immense experience in both urban and rural work. As an executive of the National Council he had gained insight not only into the problems of the evangelization of his own people, but also into the question of their relation to the life of the whole Church. He always has been a fearless and outspoken champion of human rights. The Church found in Bishop Harris a man who could carry on the work of the mission with new intensity, and bring our people on the West African coast one step further in the direction of a strong and independent Liberian Episcopal Church.

#### A COLLEGE, THE CENTER OF THE MISSION

WHEN Bishop Harris arrived in Liberia he analyzed the problems confronting the people there with characteristic incisiveness. "The future of the country," he

reported, "its economy, and the general welfare of its people, rest in the development of the products of the soil." With this firm conviction he set about the re-building and reopening of Cuttington College, a church institution that had been closed for twenty years. The Bishop's plan was to revitalize the college and make it a center for the total work of the mission in Liberia. His program for Cuttington was to create a standard four-year college for men and women, training Liberians under church auspices and Christian principles for advanced study, teaching, and places of leadership in the professional life of the nation. The college was redesigned to include a program of education in scientific agriculture, training its students in the proper development and use of the land. At Cuttington was also established a school of theology where native Christian leadership could be trained for the work of the Church. "We are concentrating," wrote the Bishop, "on the development of leadership for our work, both clergy and teachers, and in particular we undertake to relate our education to the way our people must make a living." Bishop Harris' realistic program is meeting with a successful response today; its limits are determined only by the funds available for its support. But on a large or small scale, the Bishop's burning passion is the same—to educate men and women who can build and operate churches, schools, health centers, farms, and homes that will benefit both the Christian community and the whole Republic of Liberia.

Located on ground a thousand feet above sea level, about a hundred miles inland from Monrovia, Cuttington College occupies a spectacular position in the trop-

ical countryside. Surrounded by fifteen hundred acres of fertile land, it is in the midst of growing coffee and cocoa plantations, orchards, and truck gardens. In keeping with the Bishop's aims, the farmland is a laboratory for new agricultural methods and the introduction of a wealth of new crops that Liberia has never known. Few missionary bishops have perhaps sent to the Presiding Bishop the kind of reports that come from Bishop Harris:

Our revenue crops, Nigerian palms, cocoa and coffee, are doing exceptionally well; those for local consumption, citrus fruit, pineapple and pawpaw, are doing well, with the pineapple already in production; the truck farm is producing food quantities of fresh vegetables; and our poultry is doing especially well both in egg production and in broilers. Cattle-growing is developing a type of grass which will withstand the severe dry season. In spite of this, however, we have few head of cattle. I must point out again that carrying on scientific agriculture in this country is no easy matter, chiefly because of climatic conditions and lack of scientific help. I think we are proceeding along sound lines, and I have every hope that our revenue crop will produce a substantial income once our trees reach maturity.

Among the seventeen buildings of Cuttinton College, certainly the most significant are the science and health laboratories. Their contribution to the conquest of tropical disease and the new standards of public health cannot be exaggerated. For many years the Church maintained a medical center with a mission doctor at St. Timothy's Hospital, Cape Mount, the only such center in a wide area of Liberia. Today there is another at Cuttinton, and clinical work has been started in an area where there has never been a resident physician before.

### TO TRAIN A LIBERIAN MINISTRY

AT the heart of the Cuttington plan is the theological school. From the beginning those in charge of the work of the Episcopal Church in Liberia dreamed of a future when the Liberian ministry could be trained in the Republic. From the days of John Payne onwards this has been the goal of much effort. Payne arrived in Liberia in 1837, a year after the first mission of our Church there was started, and he became missionary bishop in 1851. For many years the direction of the work was the responsibility of a Negro leader, Samuel David Ferguson, missionary bishop from 1886 to 1916, who perhaps more than any other realized that an indigenous Liberian Church would always await the production of an adequate Liberian ministry. The chief problem that confronted those who strove to achieve this goal was the lack of educational facilities on all levels. A seminary could not be established to train men who had little or no background of high school or college. A successful theological school could come only after the strengthening of grade and high schools. This problem is still before Bishop Harris. He reported at one time:

We are still suffering from a serious shortage of clergy, but our evangelistic work holds its own, owing primarily to the faithful work of our lay readers in those mission stations which are without a regular clergyman. We have some young men in Cuttington, both in the college and in the theological course, but their training requires some time, owing to their limited preparation. . . .

The situation will improve as the lower schools become better staffed and equipped to provide better preparation. . . .

Vast improvement already has taken place, and one

of the most important results of the revitalizing of Cuttington College has been its effects upon the character of secondary education.

The work of the Episcopal Church in Liberia, following the general pattern of the national life in the Republic, is divided into two parts, with the Americo-Liberian and with the native tribesmen. The modern extension of transportation and communication, together with a new integration of the civil life, has broken down this division to some degree. Tensions and misunderstanding between the different peoples of Liberia have diminished in recent years, but the pattern is not yet wholly eradicated. One part of the work of the Episcopal Church is with the Americo-Liberians in the cities and towns of the coastal areas where the Church's membership has come to include many of the leading figures in the civic, business, and professional life of the country. Another, and perhaps a more dramatic part of the missionary work, is with the tribal peoples of the interior. There is the famous Bolahun Mission, conducted with extraordinary success for many years by the American Order of the Holy Cross with the assistance of the English Sisterhood of the Holy Name. Here the monks, nuns, and their lay associates have labored among the Kisi, the Mende, the Bandi, and the Loma tribes of northern Liberia. The difficulties in that area are still those of Christian missionaries to all barbaric and pagan peoples. While many of the people of the hinterland have been converted to Mohammedanism, the great majority still hold their ancient beliefs and superstitions. Entrance into the Christian fellowship must be preceded by years of careful instruction, and followed by constant

pastoral care. Yet there is today in the Bolahun area a strong fortress of Christian natives against the paganism that surrounds them, and every promise that the labors of the future will be even more rewarding than those of the past.

#### THE GROWING OF MEN

BISHOP Harris is the first to admit that the advancement that has attended his short ministry in Liberia is largely due to the devotion and earnestness of the workers he has attracted to the Church's task there. They, in turn, would admit that he has been the decisive factor in their decision to enter the African mission field. This mutual respect and admiration account for much of the rapid progress made in recent years. The Church has driven its roots deep into Liberian life. In such a land there will ever be obstacles and difficulties of the kind we do not meet at home; yet they will always yield to the triumphant power of the Christian Gospel. Bishop Harris always speaks with enthusiasm of this achievement, and his sure confidence springs from his trust in the character of the Liberian people. His hopes for that nation are high; he has found, as have Christian heroes and missionaries in every age, that the transforming power of the Word of God is the final source of a nation's greatness. Nor is Liberia without a message for the West. As the younger Churches in India, Japan, and Indonesia have produced prophetic voices which have spoken to the older Christianity of the West with new insight into glory of human brotherhood in Christ, so will African Christianity lend its peculiar witness to the One God and Father of us all.

When Bravid Harris was consecrated in Christ and St. Luke's Church in Norfolk, Bishop Penick of North Carolina said to him in the sermon:

We have confidence that, under God, you will interpret Christ to all men, and especially to the men of your own great race. . . . We believe that you are possessed of gifts that will enable the Negro to discover his own genius as a child of God and to make his own distinctive contribution toward the fullness of truth.

In the years that have followed that occasion, Bishop Harris has been repeating that message to Liberian Christians in every act and word of his ministry to them. No other motive could have driven him at the pace that he sets for himself and his fellow workers. He is no man to waste time or energy on utopian visions or impossible dreams. The work of the Church calls for a practical genius, a homely and efficient administration, and constant willingness to deal with hard facts. His appeal for the Liberian work is less romantic than factually to the point. "There is no place on the face of the earth," he reminds us, "where a limited financial commitment would pay greater dividends." Or again,

We have come to the place where it is going to be rather difficult, if not impossible, to live in a world half serf and half free. We must accept the challenge to assist peoples in raising the level of production and enriching the lives of men so that they can make their contribution both to their own as well as for the world's enrichment.

I must remind you that it is much easier to develop the industrial potential of the country than it is to develop its men and women. Iron ore can be mined, beginning from scratch, in four or five years, but we cannot grow men in four or five years. . . .

Our policy is, therefore, designed to contribute to the

greatest possible development of the peoples under our influence in all phases of their common life.

The Bishop's complete dedication to "the growing of men" in Christianity and good citizenship has meant days and weeks of exhausting travel away from family and home. It has taken him into the forests of the hinterland, along narrow and difficult trails, across torrential streams, and up and down the long coasts. It has meant the patient understanding of people of widely different cultures. It has led him to proclaim the Gospel of Christ with authority and yet at the same time to understand the efforts men and women have made to seek God and to worship him in their primitive ways. It has brought him back and forth on trips to the United States to interpret his mission, to plead for men and money to carry on the work, and to bring before his fellow countrymen their responsibilities both as Christians and world citizens.

Men like Bravid Harris have deepened our understanding of the meaning of the episcopate in the life of the Church. His insight into what it means to be a Father-in-God to all his people, his concern for their spiritual, moral, and material welfare, his labors and prayers for their growth and development—these are the aspects of apostolic fervor that recall with new vividness the words of St. Paul, "Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches." Bishop Harris speaks out of the same fullness of vocation in Christ when he says:

A great task yet remains before us all. The door of opportunity stands open. With a new consecration on the part of our fellow Christians in Liberia, increasing support from the Church in America, and the prayers of both

those at home and in Liberia, we can, under God, make a distinct contribution toward the building of a strong Church in Liberia, and bring to realization the hopes, dreams, and visions of those faithful and consecrated souls who have given their all for Christ before us.

### For Further Reading

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*Bolahun: An African Adventure*, by Werner Junge (New York: Putnam, 1952).

*The Green Wall of Mystery*, by Shirley Hughson, OHC (West Park: Holy Cross Press, 1928).

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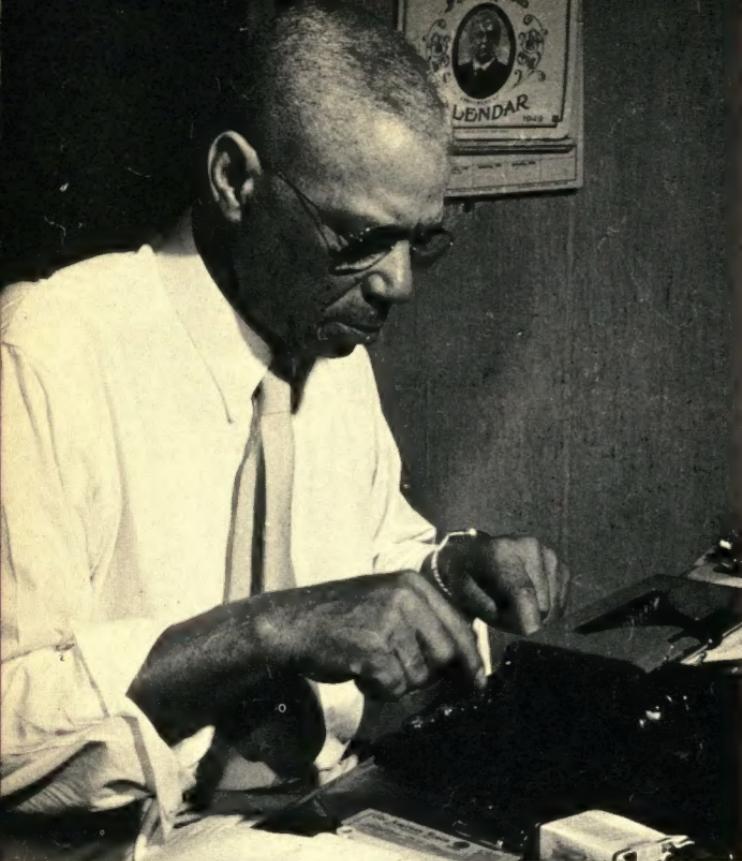
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*Bishop Harris with the Archbishop of Canterbury at the  
inauguration of the Province of West Africa*



*Bishop and Mrs. Harris at home in Monrovia*



*Bishop Harris types his report to the Presiding Bishop himself.*



*Fishing on the St. Paul River near Monrovia provides relaxation for both Bishop and Mrs. Harris.*

## Prayers

### *For Missions*

**O** GOD, who hast made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the whole earth, and didst send thy blessed Son to preach peace to them that are far off and to them that are nigh; grant that all men everywhere may seek after thee and find thee. Bring the nations into thy fold, pour out thy Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten thy kingdom; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

### *For the Family of God*

**O** GOD, who hast taught us that we are members one of another in thy Son Jesus Christ; Remove, we beseech thee, from among the people of different races, all misunderstanding and prejudice, all pride and division; and grant that, seeking what is just and equal for all, we may live and work together in that unity which is strengthened by thy love; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

### *For Missionaries*

**O** GOD, who never failest to go with those whom thou sendest; Bless thy servants whom thou hast chosen to bear thy name before the dwellers in the uttermost parts of the earth, that they may have wisdom to know, strength to do, patience to suffer, and courage to persevere in thy service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

# BUILDERS for CHRIST

A new series of biographies of men and women who have contributed in their generation to the up-building of the Church in all parts of the world. Prepared under the general editorship of the Rev. Powel Mills Dawley, Ph.D., each pamphlet is written by a Churchman peculiarly qualified to re-create the life of his subject.

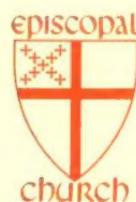
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